



## **Why relationships matter for the early years Research evidence from CRFR**

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) welcomes the opportunity to provide information for the dialogue on how best to take action to improve children's early years of life led by Professor Susan Deacon.

CRFR is a consortium research centre based at The University of Edinburgh. CRFR produces, stimulates and disseminates social research on families and relationships across the lifecourse.

The following briefing aims to summarise and distil the relevant research conducted by CRFR over the past 10 years and findings from the Scottish Government funded Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study which tracks the lives of 8000 Scottish families and their young children from birth. CRFR is actively involved in the analysis and dissemination of GUS findings.

### **Scottish families – a multifaceted picture**

- Although half of babies are born to unmarried parents, the overwhelming majority of their parents live at the same address<sup>1</sup>
- Most families are relatively stable. Just 11% of 5 years olds have experienced their father leaving or entering the household during the first three years of their lives.<sup>2</sup>
- Some children have parents in different households. Around one in four children aged 5 do not live with their father<sup>3</sup>. Around two thirds of children under 5 with a non resident parent have contact with that parent<sup>4</sup>. Most extended families will include ex-partners, ex in-laws, ex-auntie or uncle relationships. We don't even have a name for some of the relationships but these people often remain in what we call family.
- Almost all families with young children receive some form of support from the child's grandparents, with many grandparents providing a full range of support, including long periods of childcare every week. Of the two-thirds of families in Scotland with a child aged just under 2 who use childcare, 60% of these families used grandparents for all or part of this care<sup>5</sup>.
- We know that what happens in their neighbourhood and in other households is an important part of family life<sup>6,7</sup>.

- Over half of mothers with children under 5 were in paid work of 16 hours per week or more, most typically in part-time work of less than 35 hours per week. Most mothers also described themselves as 'looking after home and family', pointing to the widespread importance of work-life balance<sup>8</sup>.

## **Support for families matters**

### **Most Scottish families and communities are strong**

- Most children under 5 in Scotland live in families who eat, play games and read stories together every day<sup>9</sup>
- Most parents feel that people in their communities look out for each other's young children and can be trusted<sup>10</sup>
- Three quarters of parents with young children in Scotland have good informal support from family or friends giving advice and assistance.<sup>11</sup>

### **However, families need help sometimes**

- We know that it is important to support families who need help. We know that parents who feel supported have a positive impact on their child's cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development. We also know that parents who feel supported are more open to seeking help and advice when they need it<sup>12</sup>.
- Parenting programmes may work for some families, in some situations, some of the time. Parenting programmes only provide one type of support whereas what families need is a range of services provided in their communities. Living in child friendly communities and having a reasonable level of resources are also very important to outcomes for children
- Having a mother with a positive attitude towards seeking help has a positive impact on the health of children living in disadvantaged circumstances. Children whose mothers are open to seeking help and advice are more likely to avoid negative early health outcomes such as low birth weight, poor general health and language difficulties<sup>13</sup> although other factors are important.

### **Family breakdown is a process**

- We know that family change can be disruptive for all members of a family and that families need to be supported through this process. Children or young people experiencing family change through the divorce, separation, or re-partnering are also more likely to experience other changes such as moving house, town or school<sup>14</sup>. Family disruption or absence of a family member, in addition to other associated changes can stack up and push the balance towards risk for all family members<sup>15</sup>.
- Mothers who report low relationship strength with their partner and/or low levels of social support were more likely to experience repeated mental health problems during the first four years of a child's life<sup>16</sup>.
- We know that with older children when parents separate it changes children's relationships with both parents not just the one who becomes 'non-resident'. Children feel better when they can see by the way parents act that they still have an important place in both of their parents' lives<sup>17</sup>.
- We also know that relationships with non-resident parents (mostly fathers) are facilitated when they are supported to keep in contact by their resident

families, when their friends could be included, and when they were better off. Keeping in touch with their non-resident parents' wider family was also important to some young people<sup>18</sup>.

### **Improving planning and funding processes for early years initiatives**

- Through interviews with providers and planners, and analysis of indicators, there is some evidence that there are many benefits of working across agencies<sup>19</sup>. However, this requires additional time, skills and resources for such joint planning and delivery to be effective. There was much enthusiasm for the diversity that Sure Start Scotland enabled<sup>20,21</sup> as it allowed a range of projects to flourish. Although reaching vulnerable families not much in contact with services is important, many involved in early years' services also stressed the importance of mainstream and universal programmes<sup>22,23</sup>.
- Early years' policies should be considered complex interventions, with broad and multiple objectives, cutting across sectors and allowing for local diversity in implementation. Such an approach helps evaluators to address complex interventions by focusing on processes and systems and to explore the relationship between context, activities and outcomes<sup>24</sup>.

### **Supporting mothers and babies is not the whole story**

#### **Fathers need to be supported to do their part**

- It is important to support all those who may play a part in raising a young child. Even very young fathers can be very enthusiastic about fatherhood, but many feel marginalised by services<sup>25</sup>.

#### **Intergenerational relationships play an important role in raising children**

- Grandparents make a huge contribution to families with young children in Scotland<sup>26,27</sup>. Not only do they provide a huge amount of practical support mentioned above they can be an important source of emotional support to families. While there can be a difference in expectations of motherhood between different generations, women can look to their mothers as an 'anchor' in a sea of seemingly conflicting and often confusing advice<sup>28</sup>.
- Grandparents are also considered important by grandchildren themselves, not just looking back to early childhood but also in their teenage years<sup>29</sup>.

#### **Families are not just people you live with**

- The role of friends and neighbours is significant. What happens in the neighbourhood and in other households is an important part of family life<sup>30</sup>
- The extent to which parents feel supported has an impact on parenting behaviours<sup>31</sup>.
- Parents who reported feeling part of satisfactory social networks with friends and family engaged in more home learning activities with their children and are more open to seeking help and support, as well as being more likely to do so than were parents with fewer satisfactory networks<sup>32</sup>.

## **Social, political, cultural and environmental contexts cannot be separated from understanding and supporting families with young children**

### **How we view children**

- Supporting families is more than just a group of 'family friendly' measures like providing a nappy changing room, it is an attitude that in itself will lead to mainstreaming child friendly approaches. In its 2008 report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child commented with concern on the 'general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children' in the UK<sup>33</sup>. Twenty percent of parents with children under 5 perceived their neighbourhood to have low child-friendliness. Parents who were dissatisfied with their neighbourhood and who gave local facilities a poor rating were also negative about the area's child-friendliness<sup>34</sup>.

### **Poverty and inequality**

- Factors associated with poverty can add up to make it tougher for families. Working towards reducing health inequalities, debt and issues related to long-term unemployment<sup>35</sup> will have a positive impact on families and children.
- One quarter of children aged under 4 had been 'persistently poor' since birth. Low income in itself does not have a negative impact on children's development but poverty more generally is related to other disadvantages which together can have a negative impact on children's development<sup>36</sup>.
- Families feel that government had a role in addressing low income. However, they have mixed views over the success of government intervention and those of its agents<sup>37</sup>.

### **Neighbourhoods and services**

- Parents living in deprived areas were more likely than other parents to report low access to services like childcare, health and leisure facilities. Parents living in deprived areas and/or in social housing were also most likely to be dissatisfied with their local facilities<sup>38,39</sup>.

### **Work-life balance**

- Mothers value work highly, not only for its economic contribution, but also for personal identity, social contact and as an important message for their children<sup>40</sup>. Most working parents with children under 5 believe that their employment is not detrimental to their enjoyment of family life nor to their ability to raise their child(ren)<sup>41</sup> although it does create tensions.
- 80% of working parents with children under the age of four had access to at least one family-friendly policy such as flexible working, home working or childcare vouchers. Parents in managerial and professional occupations tended to have access to a wider range of policies than those in other occupational classifications<sup>42</sup>.
- Accessing available, affordable and quality childcare remains a key concern for parents combining caring and working<sup>43,44</sup>. Most of the sourcing, organization and resourcing of care is still usually undertaken by women, illustrating and reinforcing the gendered aspects of caring<sup>45</sup>. There is a

presumption that care services are organised around work with no provision for providing care free or child free time in families.

- For many mothers, their choice of job can be constrained by family responsibilities. They require flexibility in hours and working practices, and for many this meant taking a low-grade work<sup>46</sup>. Parents working full-time and those in lower supervisory or technical occupations were more likely to say that their employment had a negative impact on family life<sup>47</sup>.
- Many mothers find managing domestic life alongside paid work onerous and tiring<sup>48</sup>. It seems that families have to negotiate individual solutions to managing caring and providing and that tensions run through aspects of their work and family lives. Lone mothers<sup>49</sup>, as well as families living on low incomes<sup>50</sup> are particularly affected by lack of affordable childcare.

### **Environmental change**

- Environmental change and the need for families to become much more eco-aware in their everyday habits will increasingly impact all families in a variety of ways. For example:
  - Climate change and the impact of adaptations to it will likely cause an increase in the cost of food and fuel.
  - How access to green spaces impact children's health and indeed their future eco decision-making will continue to be a concern.
  - Expectations about what is 'essential' for caring for young children may continue to increase pressure for parents to buy more and more stuff.

Issues about the 'greening' of the family are likely to have a huge impact on parenting and outcomes for young children but are largely unexplored in research and need to be addressed in policy terms.

### **Recession**

- The recession is very likely to put a number of constraints on family life. The impact can be as acute as a parent losing their job or can also be more insidious, for example a climate of uncertainty that modifies people's ability to plan.
- In a recent study<sup>51</sup>, lower income families were already feeling financially stretched and aware of increasing costs of living. In addition to cutting back on choice of purchases, were also modifying family practices (e.g. going out to eat, going to the cinema less).
- Other potential impacts of the recession could include:
  - delayed family building and increased unintended childlessness for some
  - shrinkage in services that will increase the burden of care on family households and particularly women
  - more distance relationships and living-apart-together and/or more return to one-career families as coordinating employment in dual career couple becomes increasingly difficult
  - increase in low paid work with hours that are hard to manage with caring roles in the family

### **Children's views must not be marginalised**

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been influential in recognising the rights of all children to have their views considered, in all decision that affect them. This has been embraced by many sectors in Scotland<sup>52</sup>.
- Children in their early years, however, are often excluded from broader participation activities. Yet, there is considerable expertise within the early years sector itself on how to consult meaningfully with children and young people on policy and practice. This expertise could beneficially be spread beyond the early years sector – to ensure children under the age of 8 are routinely included in local and national policy-making.
- Children’s right to participate is too frequently misunderstood as solely being about ‘choice’. Choice can be important, but can ignore other participation possibilities – like children being one stakeholder amongst others when a decision is being made.
- A preoccupation with children’s ‘voice’ can ignore the many ways children express their views, and this may be particularly true for young children.

### **Importance of research**

- It is vital that good information is gathered so that we are able to better understand what leads to good outcomes for Scotland’s children and how families can be supported. The Growing up in Scotland (GUS) study is an excellent example of this. GUS is an exciting study that follows the lives of 8,000 children and their families in Scotland from infancy through to their teens. This is one of the largest longitudinal studies ever done in Scotland.
- Further studies that aim to listen to and understand people’s own experiences can help us pick apart how complex circumstances work to impact people’s lives. There is also a role for studies that pull together all the work that has already been done on an issue in one place for analysis. A programme of qualitative research supports the development of this type of information. In addition, a programme for dissemination and knowledge exchange helps to ensure that once this knowledge is generated, it can be translated and mobilised into policy making and practice development.

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